

SERVICE LEARNING POSITIVELY IMPACTS STUDENT INVOLVEMENT, RETENTION, AND RECRUITMENT

Dr. Thomas Lucy-Bouler

Associate Professor

Information Systems and Decision Sciences

Auburn University Montgomery

Montgomery, Alabama

Tink Lucy-Bouler

Executive Director/Program Manager

Nonprofit Leadership Alliance Program

Student Life

Auburn University Montgomery

Montgomery, Alabama

ABSTRACT

Universities struggle with how to get students more involved and active in the university and community. Providing projects that just collect cans or raise money for a cause, while admirable, are not teaching the students how to be active, how to conduct projects, and give them connections to the community. This paper will describe service learning projects that actually are planned, managed and executed by the students. As students get involved in these projects a sense of community on campus develops which helps with retention, recruitment and future involvement in other projects.

INTRODUCTION

Service learning is a form of experiential learning in which classroom instruction is reinforced by community service (Hunter and Brisbin, 2000). The usual model is where students are used as labor at an organization to learn an aspect of the curriculum from the experience. The student experience should be focused on furthering the skills of the student in the area of study. According to research, these students can be considered free labor and are viewed as being the recipient of the benefits of the service learning. These include improved critical thinking skills, integrating theory and practice, improving communication skills, and creating sustained civic engagement (Battistoni, 1997; Gray, Ondaatje, Fricker, and Geshwind, 2000; Hunter and Brisbin, 2000; Jacoby, 1996). Also the learning benefits have been discussed include the benefit to society of creating more informed citizen, as well as other benefits (Astin and Sax, 1998; Eyler and Giles, 1999;

Kenny, 2002). Although this research shows how students earn more typical business skills, it does not show how they gain experience in the field of study. Also, other advantages to the university are not discussed, such as campus involvement, retention, and sense of community.

In an environment of on line classes becoming increasingly popular the traditional college experience must be difficult if not impossible to reproduce on line. Service learning is an experience uniquely suited for students on a college campus. Students are provided with an opportunity to make a difference in the community they are a part of, if only for a short period of time.

This paper will describe service learning in two programs, a nonprofit leadership certificate program with associated student organization, and a class within an information systems major. The increase in the campus and community involvement will be discussed as well as the retention of provisionary students who get involved.

NONPROFIT LEADERSHIP ORGANIZATION INVOLVEMENT

Service learning increases student's interest in campus involvement, community engagement and service. At Auburn University Montgomery over 100 students from Greek organizations, student government (SGA and CAB), athletic, academic specific clubs, faith based groups, high school key clubs join together with the campus chapter of the Nonprofit Leadership Alliance to make a meaningful difference in our community. The Nonprofit Leadership Alliance program at Auburn University Montgomery holds three annual signature service learning projects. These projects transcend the typical interest of students who focus on their areas of study and development. This is a well-developed, highly inclusive mold for campus and community engagement.

Easter Egg Hunt

The original service learning program at Auburn University Montgomery was an Easter egg hunt for forty five children from the United Way's Success by Six Program and the Addulliam House, a home for children whose parents are incarcerated. The tenth consecutive year for the program, 2011, grew to include the Chisolm Community Center, United Way's Success by Six, Nelli Burge Community Center, Sunshine Center (an abused women's shelter) and children from the Addulliam House. The program provides the only Easter over one hundred and fifty children and their families will enjoy. Children not only hunt for eggs, they receive a traditional wicker basket filled with candy, toys, and a beautiful bunny supplied by Chrisha Creations, a company located in Rhode Island. The YMCA of Montgomery brings and manages inflatable play areas. The AUM athletic department brings high energy outdoor games and then instructs and plays with the children. The school's cheerleaders teach the children to cheer and many athletes from basketball, soccer, tennis, and baseball sign t-shirts for the children. Students from all areas of interest and location turn out to make it a special day for the children. We have assembled a large community of businesses who look forward to the event each year. Carrabba's Italian Grill caters the event for four hundred people. Chappy's Deli provides four hundred cookies,

Applebee's provides juice, tea, and other items, McDonald's supplies happy meal toys, Jim 'N Nick's brings out Bar-BQ, King's Catering supplies four hundred hot dogs and hamburgers, Marble Slab Creamery brings ice cream, Panera Bread Company supplies breakfast for hungry volunteers, Quiznos Sub and Fire House Sub bring sandwiches, and many other local businesses make sure there is enough food to feed all the children, parents, siblings, and volunteers. This massive amount of community involvement is recruited and coordinated by the Nonprofit Leadership Alliance students. After many years, students have developed an extensive database of community supporters. The students take donation letters to local business and year after year their support continues to grow. This project reflects the entire community from college students, leading agencies with the children in need, to the local businesses who provide the financial resources for the Easter Egg Hunt to be a huge success year after year.

Christmas Program

The eighth annual Christmas program for low income children was held in December 2010. The Kellogg's foundation funded the first Christmas program through a \$3000.00 grant. This program reflects the greatest metamorphoses in service learning programs at Auburn Montgomery. The Nonprofit Leadership Alliance students lead volunteers from many diverse organizations on campus to provide over one hundred and twenty five children and their families a holiday celebration. The Theater department on campus performs a special Christmas play specifically for the children. The children create arts and crafts and Auburn Montgomery students pay them in Santa dollars. A Santa dollar is tender for the exchange of Christmas gifts for the children's earnings. Each child will earn three different brightly colored Santa dollars and can exchange them for three gifts in Santa's workshop. Auburn Montgomery students praise the hard work of each child. The children also dance and sing Christmas songs. They have their picture taken with Santa Claus and enjoy a wonderful Christmas dinner provided by area churches and local businesses. Many partnerships are vital for this program to be a success year after year. Over

one hundred and thirty student volunteers from across campus come together for common a goal to provide Christmas to children who otherwise would have little to no Christmas celebration. Nonprofit Leadership Alliance students over the past four years wrote and received grants from the Junior League of Montgomery to provide presents for the children. Faculty, staff, AH student's parents donate presents for the program. This year the Rotary club will assist in funding the gifts. The same local businesses that provide Easter dinner also provide Christmas dinner year after year. The difference is local churches are networked and organized for a traditional Christmas dinner with one church making all the turkeys, another baking the hams, one cooking only vegetables, and the Jewish temple provides all the deserts. This is a timed event with the children arriving at different times, moving through the event at a predetermined time. The Nonprofit Leadership Alliance students develop detailed plans and structure the event so all the children have as much time as they want and need to enjoy the day.

Adopt-a-thon Program

The third signature service learning program is a Humane Society and Rescue organization adopt-a-thon known as Find-A-Friend at AUM. The Nonprofit Leadership Alliance program at Auburn Montgomery partners with humane societies and rescue organizations across the state of Alabama to provide homes for homeless pets that would be euthanized. This year will be the eighth annual Find-A-Friend at AUM. Auburn Montgomery students have assisted shelters in finding hundreds of loving homes for pets. Many partners are necessary for this event to be successful. On average twenty to twenty five shelters attend bringing two to three hundred homeless dogs, puppies, cats, and kittens. There is no cost to the shelters and Nonprofit Leadership Alliance students try to get as many items on the shelters wish list donated. Students write and take donations letter to local business requesting donations of pet items, cleaning supplies, and office materials. Find-A-Friend differs from the previous two programs because of the vital and extensive marketing required for the event to be a success. Nonprofit Leadership Alliance students

design interesting and thought provoking flyers to inform and encourage the community to attend and adopt. The students canvas the community going to as many business, churches, and special interest organizations as possible. Students utilize current technology such as My Space and Face Book to inform the community. Nonprofit Leadership Alliance students register the event on all community calendars, students appear on both afternoon T.V. talk shows the week of the event, they have a story in the local newspaper both print and online, and a local radio station advertises the event during the week before the event and broadcast lives the day of the event. The night before the event many Nonprofit Leadership Alliance students go to popular areas in town and hand out flyers, and talk to people asking if they could text, e-mail, or phone five friends to inform them of the event. The students have developed release forms and waivers for the volunteers, registration forms for the shelters, and vendor forms for pet related businesses who participate in the event. As a result of eight years of planning and dedicated effort by the students over five hundred homeless dogs, puppies, cats, and kittens found loving homes. Awareness in our community regarding the overpopulation crisis has increased.

Impact of Programs on Students

All the programs are student planned and resources are acquired and developed by the students. However, there is a need for a consistent person to maintain financial resources. Trust is at the center of the relationships with the humane shelters and organizations that care for the children. Therefore, the role of the campus executive director is critical for credibility, consistency, and future growth of the programs.

Through the development of these much needed service learning projects campus volunteerism and involvement has significantly increased. Students from all areas of interest eagerly watch and inquire about volunteering at the annual events. They have a great time at the events and have more fun than the children they are serving. During formal event evaluations student remark the best aspect of their university experience were the service learning programs. Students raise money, resources, awareness, and know that

through their effort they make a difference in the lives of the neediest in our community.

Some of the student volunteers are from several sections of a class called Study Skills. This class is designed to assist provisional students which have been identified as being at risk of not finishing college. Some of these students volunteer and become an active part of the certificate program. Out of 23 students from those classes who have been actively seeking certification, 19 or 82% graduated, 4 or 17% are working on their degree, and 8 or 34% are perusing graduate degrees. Only 2 students are not actively pursuing a degree, but both still attend every event and have intentions to finish one day.

INFORMATION SYSTEMS SERVICE LEARNING

Instead of having contrived projects for a Web Application Development course, projects are found in the nonprofit sector of the community for the students to work on as the project of the course. Three nonprofits in the past have benefited from the students designing or redesigning the website for the organization. Each one of the projects is described.

Montgomery Humane Society

The Montgomery Humane society was the first project done in the course back in fall of 2007. The website for the shelter was not current and updating the site had become cumbersome. A class consisting of 22 students was broken up into 4 teams who came up with 4 different designs for the website. The administrators of the shelter picked one design but wanted to incorporate aspects of nearly all designs into the website. The students were then split into teams to tackle each aspect of the project including coding, graphics, content and a design template. Coding was done in ASP.NET. The students worked on the project during class time twice a week.

The outcome was a completed website for the Humane Society. It incorporated all the specifications that the organization wanted and was implemented by one of the students as an independent study the next semester. Parts of the design are still evident on the website which has been rede-

signed by the current company maintaining the website. The site included links to various other organizations including petfinder.com where all shelters and rescue organizations can post their animals up for adoption. The design included a random selection of an animal from the humane society's listings on petfinder.com to be featured on each page of the site in a sidebar.

Alabama Animal Alliance

The next project was taken on by one student as an independent study. The nonprofit was the Alabama Animal Alliance, a low cost spay and neutering clinic. The clinic was brand new and needed a website for promotion. During the course of a summer, the student worked with the administrators of the clinic and provided a website that met the needs of the clinic. Again, ASP.NET was used to develop the website. As part of the class, the student also implemented the website for the clinic. The website for the clinic still has the same design the student did 4 years ago. The student still volunteers time at the clinic even though his major was information systems.

100X Mission

The project for fall 2009 was a website for a non-profit that funds orphanages around the world. The company, 100X Missions wanted a website that could serve as information and funding source. The company has orphanages in Malawi, India, Mexico, and Moldova. The website developed was never implemented due to some technical difficulties in the classroom that delayed the students working on the project in class. The 18 students in the class were split into 5 design teams. The designs were presented to the administration of 100 X. The administrators chose a combination of several designs. Students worked on the project during class time twice a week. Critical to the success was a website easily updatable with new information, pictures, and a system to take donations. A content management system was tried, but the learning curve proved too steep for students to learn. Other content management systems were tried but also failed. The only part of the project that was implementable was the design, not the management side of the content. One student later did an in-

dependent study to develop the complete website, but it has not been implemented as of yet by the nonprofit. The independent study student's website is too complex for simple management. Although the system was never finished the students still learned project management and team skills. They also became more aware of the plight of orphans and many have volunteered during 100 X Mission events.

Online Service Learning

For fall 2010, the web development class was taught online. Service learning was still implemented by working on multiple websites instead of just one. Each of the student teams was fully responsible to code a complete website. Three of the teams worked on the same site, where the other two teams worked on two completely different sites. Teams consisted of 4 to 5 students. Each team had access via e-mail directly to the administrators of the organizations to ask questions. This was different from the in class projects where the administrators came to the classroom 3 times during the whole semester. One website was implemented from the 5 projects, with the other 4 were either incomplete or not exactly what the administrators wanted.

The challenges to working online included getting the teams together. Even though the class was online, the students still felt they had to meet in person at least once to work on the project. Responsibilities were delegated, but it still seemed that students were not as engaged in the project since they did not meet in class twice a week. Motivation seemed to be lacking except for the one or two persons in each team that were motivated to get the job done. An analysis of the projects also revealed the specifications that were given the students were not very clear from the administrators of the organizations.

Impact of Projects

In each of these cases, the students indicated on evaluations for the classes that they learned more doing a website for an actual client than what they expected to learn in the class. During all projects, one person became a leader of each of the teams, being the manager of the others to get work done on time. This was an interesting

finding from the first time a project was used in the web application class. One of those leaders, who actually became a class leader, bringing all the teams together on the project, stayed on as an independent study the next term to implement the Humane Society website.

Many of the students from the web application class also volunteered to judge in a technology competition that is held in the spring semester. The students felt a commitment to serve as volunteers after the work they did in the fall in the web application class. Many of those students still serve as judges for the yearly technology competition even after graduation. They feel a connection with the academic department that wouldn't have been there had they not felt like they were working as part of the university to satisfy the needs of the nonprofits on the website projects. The technology fair has also helped with recruitment since many students who have been in the competition later come to the university as students and get involved in the technology fair.

CONCLUSION

Students who are engaged in some type of service learning feel more connected to the university. This connection helps in retention, recruitment and commitment to community service. Student's volunteer on several projects annual year after year. Many students volunteered through their high school at the projects and they choose to attend Auburn Montgomery because they felt connected to the university. A high school student who volunteered at Find-A-Friend as a high school freshman chose Auburn Montgomery as her college. She came to freshman orientation wearing the t-shirt she was given for volunteering that day as a high school freshman. At each project over 100 students volunteer to make a difference. All students are phoned to be thanked for their volunteerism immediately and reminded of the next project. Evaluations are conducted after each project and students provide meaningful reflection on their efforts. The Nonprofit Leadership Alliance has extremely dedicated and active alumni that still volunteer at projects and donate monies to the program. The projects have been recognized at the national office for their high quality. In 2008 the program won the Excellence in Student Recruitment award. This past year the

program won the Program Excellence award for the best program in the nation. Through community service projects that actually make a difference in either a child's life or in the operation of nonprofit, students are able to see they can make a difference.

The information system class projects provide the students with real projects instead of textbook assignments. Students are able to develop websites that are functional. The students come out of the class with not only experience at website development but also project management and team development work. These projects help out nonprofits organizations and give the students an opportunity to do community service that makes a difference.

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